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ARTICLE VIII.

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ON

THE KARENS.

BY

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MISSIONARY OF THE AMERICAN BAPTIST MISSIONARY UNION IN BURMA.

(Read May 19, 1853.)

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## ON THE KARENS.

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THE Karens, though but recently discovered as a people, are perhaps a more remarkable and interesting race than any other, of equal numbers, and in a similar stage of civilization, now known to Europeans. They are found scattered among other tribes of people over a territory extending from  $28^{\circ}$  to  $10^{\circ}$  N. Latitude and from  $99^{\circ}$  to  $93^{\circ}$  E. Longitude. They compose perhaps three or four distinct tribes, approaching each other in their ethnological peculiarities sufficiently near to render it proper to class them as of the same race; yet but two tribes have become much known to Europeans. The Kakhyens, inhabiting the immense territory to the North of Ava, of whom little is known, and the Karen-nees or Red Karens, so called not from their complexion, but from the predominance of red in their dress, are unquestionably of the same race. The character of the two tribes which are most known, with something of their traditions and history, has become familiar to the missionaries who have been laboring among them, with marked success, for the last twenty years. These tribes were first discovered by Europeans, so as to be much known, in 1824-7; and such has been their history since that period, in respect to Christianity, as to render a statement of their peculiarities as a people a matter of much interest, not only to the man of science but also to the philanthropist. The whole of Farther India, from Assam, or the Burramputra, to the borders of China, and from Thibet to the Straits of Malacca, is inhabited by a branch of the great Mongolian family, all the different tribes of which have many striking features in common; and this remark will apply not simply to their physical structure, but also to their mental peculiarities; and with much force also to their religions, their mythologies and their various forms of superstition. The prevailing religion is Boodhism; and hence much of their mythology and

superstition has taken the form which that system of religion tends to induce. Yet there is an influence, or a sub-structure, which seems to underlie this system, and though directly opposed to Boodhism, has never been demolished or materially weakened among the masses of the people. This sub-structure of sentiment or belief among the masses of Farther India has been adhered to by the Karens more closely than by any other race. The Peguans or Talaings, Bikethas, Tongthoos, and the Shans or the different races in the empire of Siam, have more fully embraced the manifestly later system of Boodhism, and are idolaters deriving their superstitious ideas from thence. This is also the case with one of the two Karen tribes whose peculiarities we know. But the other tribe—and it is the tribe which has yielded with far greater promptitude to the faith of Christianity—with which this sketch will be principally concerned, has retained the ancient religion with far greater distinctness and purity. Hence, though many of their traditions have a common origin with those of the races among whom they are scattered; and their myths are often evidently those common to many or all of the races of this part of India; yet there are many peculiarities belonging to this tribe, which both indicate their priority of existence, and afford in many other respects interesting subjects of investigation.

The two tribes of Karens whose circumstances are most known, are designated, in the dialect of the principal one, as Sgau and Pgho Karens. But the word *Karen* is of Burman origin, and is rarely or never used by the people themselves: *Pgah-kenyau*, which means *man* in their own language, being the only name by which they call themselves. The latter of these tribes, the Pgho Karens, are evidently a much less primitive race than the Sgau. Though their dialect is very similar, and partakes much more of the Karen than of the language of any other tribe, yet this tribe is called by the Burmans the Talaing Karen, which would indicate a mixture of Talaing and Karen blood. In physical structure, many of this tribe differ more widely from the other than do any of the other tribes which are reckoned as wholly distinct; yet upon the whole they resemble the general type of the Karen more nearly than they do any other. The Pgho or Talaing Karens are much the most vigorous and robust

tribe—with a full chest and remarkably large limbs and arms. The females are generally short but very stout, with the face large and square, cheek-bones not particularly prominent, the lips thick, and the nose large and tending to flatness at the opening of the nostrils. This tribe has a considerably darker complexion than the Sgau or pure Karens.

It would not be an easy matter to give the exact type of the Karen race. In many respects it would be difficult to distinguish them from the general Farther Indian type, which may be regarded, in relation to the rest of the human family, as a distinct type, by itself, differing in many important particulars from any other. If individuals of all the different tribes now occupying that immense territory were brought together and divested of their conventional peculiarities of dress, it would be impossible, for the most part, to distinguish them by races. They would blend together in too many particulars of complexion, contour of face, general height of stature and form, to render possible any natural classification which would approach to their present distribution. It is therefore probable that as a family of tribes they had a common origin. Yet the Sgau, or, as we choose to designate them, the pure Karens, would differ more widely from the general type than would any other individual tribe. They are generally small in stature, and give striking indications of deterioration as a race. A general languor marks their movements. This is the case particularly with the females. Their complexion in general is lighter than that of any of the other tribes among whom they are scattered; and in this respect they approach much nearer the Chinese than any of their neighbors. This circumstance may give weight to a tradition which will hereafter be alluded to, indicating their northern origin, or an origin nearer that of the original Chin or Sin race. With these slight differences, they fall into the Farther Indian type, which differs considerably from the Chinese and the Tartar. They fall in half way between the Chinese and the Peguan or Talaing.

### I. *Origin of the Karens.*

The question of the origin of the Karens will perhaps never be satisfactorily answered. The Rev. F. Mason remarks, in a work entitled *Tenasserim*: "When I first came

to this coast [more than twenty years ago] the Karens were regarded as the aborigines of the country; but they were probably in reality the last people to enter it, among the various tribes that the British found here when they took possession of the Provinces. They regard themselves as wanderers from the North; and one of their traditions states that a party of them came across 'the river of running sand,' on an exploring tour, before the Shans were established at Zimmay,\* and returned again. The crossing of this river of running sand is regarded as having been an arduous work. They understand by these waters, or river of running sand (the words admit of either rendering), an immense quicksand, with the sands in motion like the waters of a river. The tradition was quite unintelligible to me until the journal of Fa Hian, the Chinese pilgrim who visited India about the fifth century, threw a sunbeam upon this expression. He constantly designates the great desert North of Burmah and between China and Thibet, as the 'river of sand;' and in the Chinese map of India a branch of this desert is seen to stretch down South for several degrees of latitude, and then turn and run westward for a long distance. This desert is marked 'quicksands.' There can, therefore, scarcely be a rational doubt but that this is 'the river of running sand' which their ancestors crossed at a remote period before Zimmay was founded."

Since the above opinion was expressed, a new circumstance in respect to the locality of the Karens has come to light, which may have a bearing upon the question of the more original territory occupied by them. A wanderer from Yunnan, the district above Laos and reaching to Thibet, and so far North that he had seen snow and frost, for which the Karens in the Provinces have no word which they retain, arrived in Tavoy some four years ago. He has since been in the schools, and has learned to read, and manifests an energy of character uncommon to any Karens in the more southern districts. His route led him through parts of Laos, Burmah and Siam. His accounts of the Karens in his native country are peculiarly interesting and important, and are reliable as the simple statements of an unsophisticated man. He has not only revealed some new words

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\* The name of a province and city in the interior of Siam.

in the language, or words which from disuse had been wholly forgotten, but has explained the meaning of others which, though in existence in unwritten speech, were no longer in common use. An example of the former is *nahwah* for *snow*; and of the second, *thai* for *plough*. The former had been wholly forgotten, and the latter, though still retained in memory, is not used by the Karens any where within the Provinces, as they have no implement corresponding to it. The implement used by the Karens and Burmans of the Provinces and the Burman Empire, so far as known, is called by the Karens a *krah*, and is a species of harrow. The word indicating its use, is *quah-krah*, to scratch or harrow up with the *krah*. But the *thai* of the northern Karens is made of iron, unlike the *krah* of the South which is made wholly of wood. The *thai* well resembles a small forged garden-plough, common in this country twenty years ago. Another point of difference is that the *thai* is made by the northern Karens themselves, indicating a far greater degree of civilization than exists among the southern Karens.

The Karens of that country are principally independent; but, occupying a territory adjacent to the Burman Empire, they have been often attacked and many of them destroyed by their more powerful neighbors. They cultivate the soil, and seem to have carried the arts and habits of civilization to a much greater extent than their brethren of the South. They do not reckon themselves by villages or cities, or by tribes, but by families; and their social usages are strictly patriarchal in their nature. A family to the extent of three or four hundred occupy a single house, in much the same way as among the Dyaks, the ancient inhabitants of Borneo. The house, or patriarchal habitation, is an immense structure, but appears to be built of the same slight materials generally used by the southern Karens, and by the inhabitants of Farther India generally. It is made by sinking posts of large size firmly in the ground, and inserting beams or joists through the posts, seven or eight feet from the ground; and upon these laying the floor with slits of the bamboo; and then weaving mats of the same slight material for the sides of the house, and thatching the roof with the palm-leaf. The house is then partitioned by bamboo-matting into courts and halls, eating and sleeping rooms. A discipline and regularity seems to be established in these habitations, which

both secures internal harmony and respect and character for authority and power abroad. This territory, comprising a part of northern Burmah and Yunnan, might suggest itself as the original seat of the Karen race; from which companies have at different times wandered to the South, many perhaps long before the company spoken of in the tradition alluded to above.

We are not fully prepared, however, to admit that the Karens are not the aborigines of Burmah, notwithstanding the above tradition. Even though the hypothesis of their original rallying point, or origin as a nation, after the general dispersion of the human family, of which they have a supposed tradition, was the region South of Thibet and West of China, still there is room to question whether they did not gain a footing farther southward, so as to be prior to the Burmans in those regions.

The reasons which may be given in favor of the idea that the Karens are the aborigines of at least much of Burmah, are as follows. First, it is the opinion of the Burmans of the south-eastern Provinces, that they are so. The word *Karen* in the Burman is *Kayen* or *Ayen*, with the *y*-sound like *r*, which is the more general in colloquial use. This word means *first* or *aboriginal*. In the second place, they bear the character of aborigines in their relationship to the dominant races. They are much more simple and primitive in their manners, and in their ideas of a future state; and submit to their political masters with great reluctance, never mingling and never having been brought to amalgamate with them. Again, the Karens call themselves by a name which means *man*, without any limiting epithet.

Again, one of their ancient traditions distinctly fixes their location on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal, or on the eastern side of a body of water which they call Kaw or Kho. The present inhabitants have lost the meaning of these words, and the so-called body of water has become a mystery to them, so ancient is the tradition which refers to it. Yet the tradition, when examined, carries with it its own explanation. "Kaw, according to our ancestors, is a river or body of water to the West. They represent the *buceros*, or horn-bills, as migrating across it in seven days. As soon as the rainy season begins, the horn-bills migrate to the other side of the Kaw, to the country where it is dry season,



which is a seven-days journey. They there lay their eggs, and raise their young. Again, when the dry season returns here, it is wet season on the opposite side; and the horn-bills return across the Kaw to this side, and after a journey of seven days arrive again in this country." Again: "*K'ho-lo* or *Kaw-lo*, the river Kho or Kaw, is a compound. Of the meaning of this expression, or to what river or body of water it refers, we are now ignorant. It is preserved in tradition, that it is an immense body of water, the largest in the world, lying to the West; and that it runs back towards its source." This tradition and one or two others which refer to the same body or bodies of water, plainly indicate the Bay of Bengal. The difficulty seems to be in applying the word *lo*, which is now used for a *stream*, to a body of water so large as the Bay of Bengal. But it sometimes refers to the ocean, and need not be wholly restricted to a river. It is a fact, that the rainy and dry seasons exactly conform to the tradition. The wet season begins on the western side when it ends on the eastern, and *vice versa*; and perhaps the habits of the horn-bills also conform, for I do not remember to have seen them on the eastern coast, during the rainy season, though they are seen in great numbers in the dry season. From this tradition we infer that, from a period very remote, the Karens have occupied the country which they now occupy on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal. A marked circumstance which fixes the Bay of Bengal as the Kaw of antiquity, is that it reverts or runs towards what is naturally taken to be its source. A strong current sets to the North from Achen-head, or the upper end of the island of Sumatra, and passes the Nicobar islands. This would be taken by the inhabitants of the eastern shore of the Bay, as a running back to its source, since all the rivers of the Burman Empire run directly to the South, and opposite to this current which is mid-way of the Bay. This body of water is said, in tradition, to be the largest in the world, showing that at some remote period the Karens had either crossed it, or had been familiar with those who had; as is also indicated in the tradition of the migration of birds, and the peculiarities of alternate wet and dry seasons. No other body of water can answer to this description; and it is evident that no larger body of water had ever been seen by them, within the reach of their tradition. We may con-

clude, therefore, that the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal has been their habitation from time immemorial; and perhaps before the Talaing, the Burman, or the Siamese Empire was in existence. But that they did not first form as a nation, or race, far to the North of the Provinces of south-eastern Burmah, we would not pretend to affirm. It is highly probable, that when the territories of Yunnan and Laos and northern Burmah come to be explored, very many of this interesting race will be discovered, and many more of their traditions brought to light.

A tradition preserved by the Moans or Talaings, who are manifestly a more ancient people in Farther India than the Burmans, shows that the Karens were already in possession of the country to the East of the Bay of Bengal, when they themselves first made their appearance in their southern progress, as far as the promontory of Martaban. "It is also incidentally mentioned," says Mr. Mason in his *Tenasserim*, "that at the period of this visit [a visit of Gaudama to the Talaing kingdom], Tavoy and Mergui were inhabited only by Nats and Beloos. From this concentration of testimony, derived from various sources, it would appear that, several centuries before the Christian era, there existed at Thatung a people [the Talaings] who were then deemed civilized, while they were surrounded by tribes regarded as barbarous, for *beloo* is a term nearly equivalent to *wild man*." That the Beloos were Karens, may be inferred from the fact that the island South of Martaban, and perhaps the spot referred to by the tradition, was called *Beloo*, and when first discovered by Europeans was found to be almost exclusively inhabited by Karens. And the fact that the Beloos extended as far South as Tavoy and Mergui, at the earliest knowledge of the most ancient of the Burman family, clearly points out the great priority of the Karens, even in these countries along the shore of the Bay.

In reference to the distribution of the Karens, the Rev. Mr. Kincaid remarks: "The result of all my inquiries is, that *Kakhyen* is only another name for Karen. All these mountain-tribes,\* through the whole extent of the Shan country, and still North into Thibet, are called Kakhyens, except in the Hukong valley, between Mogoung and Assam

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\* The appellation "mountain-tribes" indicates simply the distinctive and aboriginal habits of the people, not that they are always dwellers on mountains.

[on the western border of northern Burmah], where they are called *Thingbau-Kakhyens*. The whole mountain-country between Mogoung and Cathay is inhabited by the same people. Around the Martaban gulf, and thence inland as far as the Burman population has ever extended, the mountain-tribes are called Karens. Between Rangoon and Toungoo, and between Toungoo and Ava, they are very numerous; as also between Toungoo and Monay, a Shan city about two hundred and fifty miles East of Ava. There are some tribes scattered along between Burmah and the Shan States, called *Karen-nee*, Red Karens, and these extend as far East as Zim-may. These are less civilized than those who live in the vicinity of Burman towns. Some have erroneously considered them as belonging to the Shan family. Their language and every thing else pertaining to them is Karen. In addition to this, the south-eastern part of Thibet is inhabited by Kakhyens; at least I have reason to believe so, as the Shans who live in the most northern part of Burmah and adjoining Thibet, call the country 'the Kakhyen country.' It will be seen, then, that these mountain-tribes are scattered over a vast extent of country, and their population I make to be about five millions." Other distinctive reasons have been given for connecting the Karens with the Chinese, and the Thibetians, of more or less importance and weight. Among these are affinities of language, in words, and the manner of reckoning time among the Karens and Thibetians. That they may have followed the Burramputra in its course North of the Himalaya mountains, from the vicinity of Central Asia, at a very early period of the world's history, is not improbable. They may have been the first to come from that centre of the most populous of the great branches of the human family; and been followed by successive waves along the same channel, until the whole Chinese domain was peopled, as well as that of Farther India. The western boundary of the Burman Empire, West of the Irrawaddy, is the line between two distinct races, as it is the line between the two Indias, the inhabitants of Hither India being of a wholly different type from those of Farther India. But passing North and East from Farther India, the same type grows sharper in its peculiarities and outlines, until it assumes in the Chinese Tartar the sharp angles of the Mongolian development.

## II. *Karen Traditions.*

The next point of interest in reference to the Karen race, is their early traditions; and so striking is the resemblance of some of these to the language of Scripture that the early missionaries advocated the idea that the Karens belong to the Jewish race. The Rev. Mr. Mason drew an extended parallelism between their language and the Hebrew, and attempted to prove that they might belong to the Ten Lost Tribes. But this idea has, I think, been wholly abandoned.

The Karen traditions concerning God attribute supreme government to him. He is called *Ywah*, which approaches the word Jehovah, or יהוה, as nearly as possible in the Karen idiom. He is not subject to sickness, nor to death, and is the creator of the universe, that is, of all that is visible to man. The name Jehovah was regarded as too sacred for utterance, and perhaps this became a reason for forgetting, to a great extent, in later generations, the character of the being himself. The traditions concerning God and the creation run as follows.

"God is immutable, eternal. He was from the beginning of the world." "He is everlasting, and existed at the beginning of the world." "He existed in the beginning of time. The life of God is endless. Generations cannot measure his existence." "God is complete and good, and through endless generations will never die." Again: "God is omnipotent, but we have not believed him. God created man anciently. He has a perfect knowledge of all things to the present time." "The earth is the footstool of God, and heaven his seat. He sees all things, and we are not hid from his sight. He is not far from us, but in our midst"—showing that God was believed to be a spirit. More particular allusion to the specific work of the creation, and an almost exact resemblance to the Scripture history of it, is found in other traditions. "He created man, and of what did he form him? He created man at first from the earth, and finished the work of creation. He created woman, and of what did he form her? He took a rib from the man and created the woman." Again: "He created spirit or life. How did he create spirit? Father God said: 'I love these my son and daughter. I will bestow my life upon them.' He took a particle of his life, and breathed it into their

nostrils, and they came to life and were men." "Thus God created man. God made food and drink, rice, fire and water, cattle, elephants and birds."\*

In order to the appreciation of a tradition still more striking than the one in reference to the creation, it is necessary to allude to the belief of the Karens relative to the evil being by whom the man and woman first created were induced to transgress the commands of God. This evil being is variously designated in the Karen traditions, according to his influence on men, and his relation to the other state of existence. His impersonation is sometimes male, and sometimes female. He is called Nauk'plau, in allusion to his having tempted men to forsake God and then abandoned them to destruction, as the hen drives from her her weaned chicklings.

"Nauk'plau at the beginning was just,  
But afterwards transgressed the word of God.  
Nauk'plau at the first was divine,  
But afterwards broke the word of God.  
God drove him out and lashed him from his place:  
He tempted the holy daughter of God.  
God lashed him with whips from his presence;  
He deceived God's son and daughter."

The being thus described was the agent in the temptation and destruction of man, and the following is the tradition in reference to that event, which we translate as literally as possible. "Pa Ywah, our father God, spoke and said: 'My son and my daughter, I shall make for you a garden, and in the garden will be seven different kinds of trees, bearing seven different kinds of fruit. But among the seven different kinds of fruit there will be one which it is not good for you to eat. Do not eat of it. If you eat of it, sickness, old age and death will come upon you. Eat not of it. Consider, every thing which I have created, all, I give to you. Select to eat and drink whatever you desire. Once in seven days I shall come to visit you. Harken to all I command you, and take heed to what I say. Do not forget me. Worship me each morning and evening as they return.'

"After this, Mūkaulee [the devil under another name, but the name principally in use to designate that being]

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\* Mr. Mason's translations.

came and asked them : 'Why are you here?' 'Our father God placed us here.' 'What do you here find to eat?' asked the devil. To that they replied : 'Our father God has created for us food and drink, and our food is more abundant than we can eat.' The devil said to them : 'Permit me to see your food,' and the husband and wife both conducted him away to show it to him. The devil followed them to the garden, and they showed him the fruit and said : 'This is sweet, this is sour, this bitter, this astringent, this delicious, this pungent, this savory. But this tree we do not know. Whether it is sour or sweet, we know not. Our father God commanded us, in reference to this tree : "You shall not eat of it. If you eat of it," said he to us, "you shall surely die;" and we have not eaten of it; and whether it is sour or sweet, we know not.' Then the devil said : 'Not so, my children. Your father God has no regard for you. The tree of which the fruit is most delicious and the sweetest, more delicious and sweeter than any other—he commands you not to eat of it. Not only is the fruit of this tree delicious and sweet, but if you eat the fruit you will become divine, and will ascend to heaven, or enter the lower parts of the earth, at pleasure; and will be able to fly. Your God has no love for you, and does not wish to make your lot agreeable. I am not like your God. Your God is unjust and envious. But I am just and not envious. I love you, and tell you all things [do not leave any thing unknown to you]. Your father God does not love you, and does not tell you all things. If you do not believe me, do not take the fruit. But if you will each of you take of it and eat, you will know.' The man replied : 'Our father God commanded us not to eat the fruit of this tree, and we will not eat it.' So saying, he arose and left the place. The woman, on the contrary, listened to the words of the devil, and was slightly pleased with what he said. Upon this the devil renewed his attempts, and at length she yielded to his varied solicitations, and raised her eyes upon him and said : 'Do you say that, if we eat, we shall be able to fly?' The devil replied : 'My son and my daughter, it is purely from my great love for you that I have spoken to you.' Then the woman took of the fruit, bit and ate. Upon which the devil laughed and said : 'My daughter, you have well and readily listened thus far to my words, but I will again speak.

Go to your husband, and give him of the fruit to eat; and say thus to him: "I have eaten the fruit, and it is exceedingly delicious." Thus say to him, and, if he refuses to eat, you must entice till he eats. You have already eaten, and if you die you will die alone. If you become divine, you will become so alone. As the devil said to her the woman did, and enticed her husband as he directed her. She repeated her enticements until finally he yielded to her, and took the fruit from the hand of his wife and ate it. When this was done, and her husband had eaten the fruit, she went and told the devil, and said to him: 'My husband has eaten the fruit.' Whereupon the devil laughed excessively, and said: 'Now, my son and my daughter, you have well done in listening to me.'

"But again, on the morrow after the day in which they had eaten the fruit, Ywah [Jehovah] came to visit them. But they no longer followed God, and met his coming with their songs and their hymns of joy. God came to them, and asked of them: 'The tree of which I said ye should not eat, have ye eaten of it? I commanded you. Why have you eaten of it?' But they were afraid to return any answer to God; and he cursed them and said: 'That which I commanded you, you have not heeded nor obeyed. The fruit of which I said: "It is not good to eat, eat it not," ye have eaten. You have disobeyed, and have eaten it. And now, old age, sickness and death shall come upon you. But it shall be in this way. Some of you shall sicken and recover, and some shall die. There shall be those among you who shall die after the life of a single day. There shall be those who shall live two days and die, three days and die. There shall be those among you who shall die in their youth—virgins and young men shall die. Women shall die when but half their births are finished, and others shall die when their bearing is passed. There shall be some among you who shall die when their locks are white, and others shall die when old age has come upon them.' Thus God commanded and cursed them, and God ascended up from them."

The following couplets are also explicit, and preserve the additional fact that the tempter appeared in the form of a serpent or dragon.

"Ywah in the beginning commanded,  
But Nauk'plau came to destroy.

Ywah at the first commanded,  
 Nauk'plau maliciously deceived unto death.  
 The woman E-u and the man Thay-nai—  
 The malicious fiend enviously looked upon them.  
 Both the woman E-u and the man Thay-nai  
 The dragon regarded with hatred.  
 The great dragon deceived the woman E-u,  
 And what was it that he said to her?  
 The great dragon deceived them unto death,  
 And what was it that he did?  
 The great dragon took the yellow fruit of the tree,  
 And gave it to Ywah's holy daughter.  
 The great dragon took the white fruit of the tree,  
 And gave it to Ywah's son and daughter to eat.  
 They kept not every word of Ywah,  
 Nauk'plau deceived them. They died.  
 They kept not each one the word of Ywah,  
 Then he deceived and beguiled them unto death.  
 They transgressed the words of Ywah,  
 Ywah turned his back and forsook them.  
 After they had broken the commands of Ywah,  
 Ywah turned his back upon them and left them."

Other traditions of a like nature refer to the curse upon man as increasing his toil and compelling him "to eat his food by the sweat of his brow;" and to the poisonous fruit by which, through the temptation of Satan, sickness and death came upon the human family.

But, singular as it may seem, the traces of Scripture history in the Karen traditions of later events, so far as has been discovered, are exceedingly feeble and obscure. The deluge seems to be shadowed forth in one or two, as does also the dispersion of the human family. A tradition as translated by Mr. Mason, runs thus: "Anciently, when the earth was deluged with water, two brothers, finding themselves in difficulty, got on a raft. The waters rose and rose till they reached to heaven; when, seeing a mango tree hanging down, the younger brother climbed upon it and ate, but the waters suddenly falling left him in the tree. . . ." In reference to the dispersion of man over the earth, Mr. Mason adduces the following tradition: "Men had at first one father and mother, but, because they did not love each other, they separated. After their separation they did not know each other, and their language became different, and they became enemies to each other and fought."



"The Karens were the elder brother ;  
 They obtained all the words of God.  
 They did not believe all the words of God,  
 And became enemies to each other.  
 Because they disbelieved God,  
 Their language divided.  
 God gave them commands,  
 But they did not believe him,  
 And divisions ensued."

Another tradition, after representing all as scattered away from the presence of Ywah, speaks of the younger brother, or "the *white westerner*," as begging the Karen, or elder brother, to return to the place where they left God, who, for the sake of proving their faith, had plunged into the sea, and by the stench produced in the waters had frightened away the inhabitants of the earth. The elder brother refuses to return, but the younger brother returns and finds God, who receives him, and warns him not to remain in the country of the elder brother, lest he should misuse him ; and thus God conveys the white race by themselves to a country in the West. Here seems to be a confused blending together of the tradition of the flood [the remembrance of its effects, in the decomposition of so much animal matter] which was the act of God, and the division of the human family which took place after the flood.

### III. *Karen Prophets.*

Individuals have arisen among the Karens, from time immemorial, who are styled *wees*, or prophets. They gain great influence over the minds of the people, and are supposed to be capable of foretelling future events ; and, singular as it may seem, many of their prophecies have been strikingly fulfilled. These prophets are supposed, and suppose themselves, capable of working themselves into a "superior state," in which they are capable of seeing what is invisible to other men. They can see the departed "life" or spirit (the sentient soul) of the dead, and even have the power of recalling this spirit, and bringing it back to its body, and thus restoring the dead to life. When a prophet is approached by an inquirer after future events, or any thing which is hidden from other men, the prophet's first object is to throw himself into a state of clairvoyance. He

writhes his body and limbs, rolls himself on the ground, and often foams at the mouth in the violence of his paroxysms. When he is satisfied with his condition, he becomes calm, and makes his prophetic announcement. Many of the prophecies preserved by the people are those which refer to their deliverance from the hard and oppressive usage which they received from their more powerful neighbors, the Burmans and Shans, by whom they were preyed upon with a most destructive rapacity from a period farther back than can be reached by the memory of any of the present generation. An ancient prophet is represented as saying of the expected deliverance: "If it comes by water, rejoice, for you will be able to take breath. But if by land, you will not find a spot to dwell in." Again: "When the Karens have cleared the horn-bill city [an ancient city near Tavoy, which the Karens were required to clear] three times, happiness will arrive." And in explaining this they say: "So, when the the Burman rulers made them clear it for the last time, they said among themselves: 'Now we may suppose happiness is coming, for this is the third time of clearing the horn-bill city;' and, true enough, before they had finished, we heard that the white foreigners had taken Rangoon."\* Again: "When the Karens and white foreigners shall fight, then happiness will arrive." This is explained by the fact that the Karens were required by their Burman rulers to meet and fight with the English, and that great happiness and prosperity have followed them since that event. Their prophets taught "that the white foreigners were in the possession of all the words of God, and that they would one day come and restore to the Karens the true knowledge of God, which they professed themselves to have lost, and would *restore their books containing the word of God*."

The *wees*, or prophets, are held in great dread by the people, on account of their supposed power over the spirits of men. A myth represents a mother who had by ill-treating her daughters caused their death, but repents of her cruelty, and calls for the *wee* to aid her in her distress. The *wee* finds the spirit of the younger daughter, who entreats the spirit of the elder to return on account of the sorrow of

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\* Mr. Mason, from a native document.

their mother. The elder, after some objections on account of the ill-usage they had formerly experienced, and the probability of its repetition, at last yields, and they go back to their former bodies, which are restored to life, and the daughters are presented to their mother. But the ill nature of the mother again prevails, and the same abuse is repeated, and the same results ensue. Again the *wee* is sought for, when the shade of the elder daughter proves inexorable, and she winds herself deeper into the earth. The younger alone returns, and is received by the mother, and again shrinks from her cruelty to the world of shades. Whereupon the *wee* can no longer be induced by the wicked mother to interfere with the shades of her departed daughters.

When the *wee* is employed to call back a departed shade or life, his pursuit in the regions of the dead is sometimes unsuccessful. But, bent upon his benevolent purpose for his particular employer, he sees and lays hold of the shade of some person still in life, and by diverting it to the dead person, restores him to life. As a consequence, however, the living person, whose truant spirit, in a wandering dream, or in the hour of sleep, had ventured too far from its home, is seized, sickens, and dies. But the game of the *wee* does not stop here. If the last dead person has friends to invite the services of the *wee*, he, well aware of the direction which the shade of the unfortunate person has taken to enter and resuscitate the body of a neighbor, looks around again for a shade wandering forth in a dream, seizes it, and conducts it to the newly departed; and in this way becomes the occasion of great trouble by a succession of deaths. Hence the warning to avoid soliciting the services of the *wee* in such cases.

The *wees* are the authors of most of the poetry, or didactic couplets, and ballads, which have been found among the Karens. They are for the most part feeble, nervous, excitable men, such as would easily become somnambulists, or subjects of clairvoyance.

There is another class of prophets of a different character, rarely making pretensions to the prediction of future events, who are called *bookhos*, or masters of feasts, and might be called the priests of religion. They have methods of determining the future in cases of sickness, take the direction of the general religious ceremonies of the people, and

teach the doctrines of the system which they adopt in worship, the charms, etc. They are not so much dreaded by the people as the *wees*, and are generally more respected. They are the heads of communities, but distinct from the hereditary chiefs, though they sometimes combine in themselves the character and functions of both.

#### IV. *Religion of the Karens.*

At the time when Christianity was first introduced among the Karens, no distinct traces of the worship of *Ywah* were found. Though the name was retained as the name of God supreme and unchangeable, yet the obligation to worship was no longer felt. A long and distinct tradition is found, in which men, after the fall, are represented as led from step to step into the practice of the ceremonies, charms and necromancies which were adroitly made known to them by the devil. After the fall, and the separation of men from God, they in the first place apply to Satan for his aid, as they expect no more from God, to avert the sentence of death and its effects. This aid he renders by introducing charms against sickness and death; and hence grows up a species of demon-worship, which is the prevailing worship now found among the heathen Karens. They make no images of the demons, and regard them as spiritual beings, though capable of appearing in any shape they please. There is a general belief in the immortality of the soul, yet this is not universal. Traces are supposed to be found of a resurrection of the dead, but there is, I think, no other conception of it than in the way of credulous superstition, which, among all uncivilized nations, is ready for tales of wonder. The doctrine of transmigration has no authority with them, yet there are many who reject the common superstitions concerning a future state, and suppose that the life "flies off in the air" and is lost, so that death is the termination of existence. But this is not the general sentiment.

#### V. *Karen Mythology.*

The mythology of the Karens, or their belief concerning spiritual beings, has many interesting features, and though we do not expect to do justice to the whole subject, yet a few particulars may be stated. Aside from the two great principles of good and evil, which in more modern times

they have been less familiar with, they recognize a host of inferior beings which it would be difficult to classify with any accuracy; many of which, however, when reduced to their origin, terminate in the elements of material nature, the objects of science in civilized society. So that we here see, in fact, nothing else than attempts to account for positive and natural phenomena, by the best methods within the reach of untaught and superstitious people.

A large class of spiritual beings, capable of many subdivisions, is included by the Karens under the general name of *kelah*. The primary import of this name is *pure*, unmixed, clear or transparent. This definition gives us a clue to its sense as a mythological term. Every object is supposed to have its *kelah*. Axes and knives, as well as trees and plants, are supposed to have their separate *kelahs*. When the rice-field presents an unpromising appearance, it is supposed that the rice-*kelah* is detained in some way from the rice, on account of which it languishes. If the *kelah* cannot be called back, the crop will fail. The following formula is used in calling back the *kelah*: "O come, rice-*kelah*, come! Come to the field. Come to the rice. With seed of each gender, come. Come from the river Kho, come from the river Kaw; from the place where they meet, come. Come from the West, come from the East. From the throat of the bird, from the maw of the ape, from the throat of the elephant \* \* \*. Come from the sources of rivers and their mouths. Come from the country of the Shan and Burman. From the distant kingdoms come. From all granaries come. O rice-*kelah*, come to the rice." All the inferior animals are supposed to have their *kelahs*, which are also liable to wander from the individual and thus to be interfered with in their absence. When the *kelah* is interfered with by an enemy of any kind, death ensues to the individual animal to which it belongs.

"The human *kelah* is supposed to be capable of leaving the body and wandering at pleasure; and this is particularly the case when the bodily senses are locked in sleep, when if, as often happens, it is detained beyond a certain time, disease ensues; and if it is permanently detained, death is the consequence."\* On this account, offerings are made to

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\* Dr. Wade.

the *kelah* to induce it to return. Rice and various dainties are placed by the wayside, or in the forest, and different formulas are used to call back the *kelah* to partake of the prepared repast, when it is hoped that it will re-enter the body, and that the sick person will be restored to health, or the dead to life.

The *kelah* is not regarded as the responsible agent in human action. The good or bad actions of the individual, in this sense of the *kelah*, are not attributed to its influence. An extract from a native's remarks upon it will show the distinction made between the soul, or responsible agent, and the *kelah*. "When we sin, or commit any offense, it is the *thah*, soul, which sins; and again, when we perform any good action, it is the *thah*. Praise-worthiness, or blame-worthiness, is attributed to the *thah* alone. By some the *kelah* is represented as the inner man, and with others the inner man is the *thah*. When the eyes are shut and in sleep, the reflective organs are awake and active. This is sometimes attributed to the *kelah*. Hence the *kelah* is the author of dreams."

One method of calling back the *kelah* illustrates a curious fact of electricity, manifestly connected with some striking phenomena which now seem to be recognized in this country. The coffin containing the body of the dead person, is placed in the centre of the room, upon the floor. A slender rod of bamboo is inserted through a hole in the lid. An attenuated thread is tied to the upper end of the rod, and small tufts of raw cotton are tied to the thread alternately with pieces of charcoal, extending downwards to the end of the thread, which nearly reaches the floor. A small cup containing a hard boiled egg, is placed under the end of the thread. A brass or silver ring is tied to the lower end of the thread, so that it hangs within a short distance of the egg in the cup. The ring soon begins to draw down toward the egg with considerable force, it is said, and the thread begins to vibrate till it finally breaks asunder. This indicates the presence of the *kelah*. The rod is always of a particular kind of bamboo. Sometimes, this experiment does not succeed, when they imagine that the *kelah* does not return.

The idea in all these cases is, that the *kelah* is not the soul, and yet that it is distinct from the body, and that its

absence from the body is death. The *kelah* is more apt to forsake feeble persons and children. Hence, when corpses are carried by, in removing them from the house, children are tied to a particular part of the house, with a particular kind of string, lest their *kelahs* should leave them, and pass into the corpse which is passing. The children are kept tied in this way until the corpse is carried completely out of sight. The house where the person died is abandoned, lest the *kelah* of some person remaining in it, especially of one of the children, should be induced to accompany the departed, whose *kelah* may thereby the more readily return to a wonted spot, and call for a friend's *kelah*. Of this many cases are believed to have occurred.

The weakness or strength of a person depends upon the faithfulness of another sort of being, which will be described hereafter.

Thus far, the word *kelah* would seem to signify *life* or *existence*, and its primary meaning is retained. Life or existence, in the abstract, is personified. It is considered as independent of the organization of the body, and as entering it to dwell there, and leaving it, at will. As bare existence, it is the individuality, or general idea, of an inanimate object. It is also the individuality of the animated being. It in fact personates the varied phenomena of life.

But the *kelah* is represented in another and still higher class of phenomena.

The *kelah* is supposed to possess seven separate existences, each of which seeks the destruction of the person to whom they belong. Yet, singular enough, though seven, they are seven in one. The first seeks to render the person insane or mad; the second produces reckless folly; the third produces shamelessness, and seems to be the origin of the libidinous passions; the fourth produces anger and the like passions, which result in cruelty and acts of violence, murders, etc. These *kelahs* are constantly bent upon evil, and striving to bring it upon the person to whom they belong.

But there is another being which is supposed to have its seat somewhere upon the upper part of the human head, which is called *tsō*. While this retains its seat, no harm can befall one from the efforts of the *kelahs*. They cannot induce or inflict any injury upon the person, while the *tsō*

remains in its place. But if the *tsō* becomes heedless or weak, certain evil to the person is the result. Hence, the head is carefully attended to, and all possible pains are taken to provide such dress and attire as will be pleasing to the *tsō*. Going under a house, especially if there are females within, is avoided; as is, also, the passing under trees of which the branches extend downwards in a particular direction, and the but-end of fallen trees, etc.

The literal and ordinary meaning of the word *tsō* is *power*, and it probably has the same sense as applied to a personification. A probable explanation of the *kelah* and the *tsō*, taken together, is the following. The *kelah* signifies that part of human nature which pertains to life—the sentient soul, or the animal spirit—the feelings, and particularly the passions, which in fact are continually tending, in the present condition of our nature, to evil and to destruction. This part of our nature, being observed, is accounted for on the supposition of indwelling personalities, which, though distinct and dissimilar, are nevertheless united into one, constituting one whole class of faculties, or the whole of the sentient soul. High above this, and in its own proper seat, is *reason* or the *tsō*, the true power of the man, which, until dethroned or enfeebled, so orders the whole as to protect it from injury, and so guides as to prevent the approach of ill. But, this system not recognizing any higher faculty than reason, all failures are attributed to its defects, or its absence.

There is another class of spiritual beings embracing vampires, hobgoblins, spectres and ghosts, under the general name of *theret-thekahs* and *kephoos*.

The *kephoo* is a species of vampire. The same may be said of the *theret*, though this is rather a sort of hobgoblin. Both prey upon the lives or *kelahs* of men.

The *kephoo* is represented as the stomach of a wizzard, which at night, in the repulsive form of a human head and entrails, sallies forth in quest of food. In this form it secretly attacks the lives of men, or devours their *kelahs* and thus produces death.

The *therets* are the spirits or shades of those who have died by violence. They are defined by a Karen to be “the spirits of men who do not deserve a place in *Plupoo* [the infernal regions], of men who have been shot as a punishment,



or who have been killed by tigers or elephants, or who have died by a fall, by the sword, by starvation," etc. These spirits are unable to enter *Plū*, much less are they able to enter the country of the *mūkhahs*, or inhabitants of heaven, who will be spoken of hereafter. They remain on the earth and wander about, but are invisible. They are the occasion of mortal sickness to men, by seizing their *kelahs*. These vampire-like beings are exceedingly dreaded by the people. Offerings are made to them, and the strongest supplications and petitions are offered to avert their anger and their cruel assaults.

The *tah-mus* or *tah-kas* (two names of one and the same signification) are spectres, or the spirits of tyrants and oppressors, of adulterers, and of all those who have been guilty of great wickedness; and the Burmans in particular are included in the category. After they leave the body, they appear in the form of horses, elephants and dogs, crocodiles and serpents, vultures and ducks, and this not in the way of metempsychosis, but as the immediate choice of the spirit, at the time, and simply for apparition. They sometimes appear as colossal men, as tall as the trees; and are seen in the deep solitudes of forests and jungles, apparently seeking their food from the trees.

Ghosts, properly speaking, are *sekhahs*. No offerings are made to them. They are the spirits of infants and of persons who from accident have not been buried or burned, and of old persons whose *tsōs* have forsaken them, so that they have died of weakness.

Another class of spiritual beings consists of the *plupho*, or inhabitants of the infernal regions. They are the spirits of all persons who at death go to their proper places in the regions of the dead—those who do not become *therets*, nor any of the above-mentioned evil beings. They go to their proper country and renew their earthly employments. As the North American Indian, with his dog and bow, seeks food in the beautiful hunting-ground of the world of the departed, so the Karen, with his axe and cleaver, may build his house, cut his rice, and conduct his affairs, after death, as before.

The location of *Plū* is not determined. Some suppose it to be beneath the earth; others, that it is above; and others, that it is just beyond our horizon, and separated from our

vision only by the white haze which seems to limit our sight. Those who suppose that this country is beneath us, reveal in their tradition, wittingly or unwittingly, the fact that the sun enlightens the opposite side of the earth; for, when it is morning to us, it is evening to the inhabitants of *Plū*.

The king of this country is called *Cootay* or *Theedō*. He has dominion over all the classes of spiritual beings before-mentioned. Those confined to the earth are his servants and soldiers there, doing his bidding. It is a peculiarity worthy of notice, that he is not the king of hell, but simply of the region of the dead. A literal translation of a native's description of his office will be valued. "*Cootay*, or *Theedō*, holds his dominion in the country of *Plū*. When he comes to call our *kelahs*, our bodies die, and we become the inhabitants of *Plū*, and enter the dominions of *Cootay*. When he has called men, and they are under his dominion, if they by their endeavors please him, or are good, they are in due time dismissed to the region above, or heaven. But, on the contrary, if they are wicked, such as strike their fathers and mothers, they are delivered into the hands of the king of hell, and punished by being cast into hell."

Hell is called *Lerāh*, and includes two grades of punishment, the common hell and the great or severe hell.

There is still another class of spiritual beings, called *tahnahs* or *nahs*. These are the *nats* of the Burmans.\* They are invisible to human sight, and yet they prey upon men in a way similar to that of the *therets*. They are of two sorts, and have the power of taking any form they please, as that of snakes, toads, reptiles, tigers, swine, dogs, etc.

Their origin is explained as follows: "The Lord of men created them in consequence of a disobedience on the part of men to one of his commands, as a punishment for their offense." The two sorts are those originally created, and those which have originated from wizzards in this life. These last are regarded as the worst sort, and it is certain death when they seize upon a person. This class of beings are properly fiends. Their head, or king, is *Mūkarulee*, the great tempter in the primitive garden of mankind, the devil.

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\* Probably borrowed from the Karens, or derived from a common source.

Another class of spiritual beings are called *mūkhahs*. They are the parents and ancestors of the Karens, who have died and ascended to the upper regions, where they have a country and cities under the dominion of their king. They are divine, and are the creators of the present generations of men. If persons are made by the king of the *mūkhahs*, they are turned off in too hasty a manner, and are maimed, lame, ill-formed and imperfect. The reason of this is that the king of the *mūkhahs* has too much on his hands, and is interrupted in his work. But when the *mūkhahs* themselves perform the work, it is done at leisure and with care. These beings preside over the births and marriages of men. It is believed that they mingle together the blood of the two persons to be united in marriage, thus making them one. If this mingling of blood does not first take place, no proper marriage can be consummated.

There are other spiritual beings supposed to exist, such as those which create the winds with their fans, called *ke-leepho*; those which cause the eclipse of the sun and moon, called *tah-yoomū*; and two other classes which preside alternately over the wet and dry season, and produce the lightning and thunder, called *coodā* and *laupho*. Of the last named, one class presides over the dry season and becomes weary with continued toil; while the other, having been driven away at its commencement, is at rest. The other, at the close of the dry season, sallies forth with chariots and fiery spears, and with darts and thunders assaults the wearied one, which soon gives up the contest, and retires, to be succeeded, in the government of the season, by the other, fresh from its retirement in the deep solitude of the forest. But the latter regains its power only to be met, at the return of the dry season, by its adversary, and to be itself driven from its seat by fiery darts and thundering chariots.

The *mūkhahs* are objects of worship, and offerings are made to them, though rather to appease them than from any supposed obligation; for, though they are in the main good, they are not wholly devoid of the vampirism of their neighbors, the *tah-nahs* and the *theret-thekahs*. This vampirism runs through all the classes of mythological beings which have any thing to do with men.

Among the sprites of nature, and one of the most benevolent, is *Pheebee Yau*, or Ceres, who sits in her place upon a lonely stump, the live-long day, to watch the growing corn and the ripening ear. Her object is to fill the granaries of the frugal and industrious with rice; and she is a great favorite among the people.

This somewhat miscellaneous sketch may serve as an outline of Karen mythology. There are, however, many interesting myths and tales which might be made use of to throw farther light upon the system.